

Samuel Johnson and the Concept of Subordination

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Preface

“‘Every man,’ said Imlac, ‘may, by examining his own mind, guess what passes in the minds of others.’”¹

It is recorded by James Boswell that Johnson believed that “Mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination.” This dictum was made by Johnson in 1773 when he was asked by Mrs. Macaulay: “How he could reconcile his political principles with his morals; his notion of inequality and subordination with wishing well to the happiness of all mankind, who might live so agreeably, had they all their portions of land, and none to domineer over another.”²

However, in his *Review of A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* produced by Soame Jenyns in 1757, he had condemned as false the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, next to “Nature,” “the Great Chain of Being,” which is “extraordinarily well adapted to the use of thinkers who wish to find philosophic support for a static concept of society, for it asserts the inherent necessity of subordination.”³ Soame Jenyns was a country gentleman, a Deist until middle age, who gave the epitome of his world view in his *Free Inquiry* essay.

Johnson’s contempt for Deism is well known, but when this and his concept of subordination are set side by side, we perceive, though with some embarrassment, inconsistencies in the texture of his thought

of subordination. Critics have noticed contradictions and paradoxes of the same kind in Johnson. Arthur O Lovejoy points out that his famous Neoclassical precept in *Rasselas* about the streaks of the tulip is, "in the last analysis, under the influence of the [Deistic] preconception," on the basis of his affirmation that aesthetic orthodoxy and religious heterodoxy in that age grew "from the common root,"⁴ that is, the concept of "the Great Chain of Being." Stuart Gerry Brown enumerates instances of Johnson's use of the stock terms of the rationalists he attacked in the *Review*.⁵ Bertrand H. Bronson also comments that inconsistencies in Johnson are "in no small part of perennial interest."⁶

Notwithstanding these criticisms a closer study of the episode above-mentioned leads us to the observation that Mrs. Macaulay made a clear distinction between Johnson's political principle of subordination and inequality and his moral principle of happiness in equality and liberty. Johnson's idea of happiness, indeed, must be the key to the difficult compromise between these conflicting principles in his mind. His notion of subordination also must be viewed, not in isolation from, but in relation to, his age and society where political power struggle and monetary interest were going hand in hand with various evangelical social reforms and where the center of reference was shifting "from the human race to the human individual."⁷

This study intends to inquire into Johnson's concept of subordination by examining his *Review of A Free Enquiry*, over against the contemporary view of the universe as "the Chain of Being," without paying specific attention to the Deistic problems, for the divergencies between Deism and revealed religion "grew from the common root," and they were not, George Sherburn testifies, always easy to establish.⁸

Chapter I

The Great Chain of Being as Apologetic for Subordination

Arthur O. Lovejoy says that the eighteenth century is the age of "the Great Chain of Being" and that there has been no period in which writers of all sorts—men of sciences and philosophers, poets and po-

pular essayists, Deists and orthodox divines—talked so much about “the Great Chain of Being”⁹ or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas—plenitude, continuity, gradation, which owed its genesis to Plato¹⁰ and Aristotle¹¹ and its systematizers,¹² for the idea conveniently serve as apologetic for their principle of the *status quo* and subordination.

“The chain of Being,” this world picture, made its first significant appearance in English philosophy through the writing of John Locke. He explicitly accepted the theory:

In all the visible corporeal world, we see no chasms, or gaps. All quite down from us the descent is by easy steps, and a continued series of things, that in each remove differ very little one from the other.... And when we consider the infinite power and wisdom of the Maker, we have reason to think, that it is suitable to the magnificent harmony of the universe; and the great design and infinite goodness of the Architect; that the species of creatures should also, by gentle degrees, ascend upward from us toward his infinite perfection, as we see they gradually descend from us downward: which, if it be probable, we have reason then to be persuaded, that there are far more species of creatures above us than there are beneath: we being, in degree of perfection, much more remote from the being of God, than we are from the lowest state of being, and that which approaches nearest to nothing.¹³

Addison rendered a great service in popularizing this world picture and the image of man as “the *nexus utriusque Mundi*.”

The exuberant and overflowing Goodness of the Supreme Being whose Mercy extends to all his Works, is plainly seen...: Nor is his Goodness less seen in the Diversity, than in the Multitude of living Creatures. Had he only made one Species of Animals, none of the rest would have enjoyed the Happiness of Existence; he has, therefore, *specified* in his Creation every degree of Life, every Capacity of Being. The whole Chasm in Nature, from a Plant to a Man, is filled up with diverse Kinds of Creatures, rising one over another, by such a gentle and easy Ascent,

that the little Transitions and Deviations from one Species to another, are almost sensible. This intermediate Space is so well husbanded and managed, that there is scarce a degree of Perfection which does not appear in some one part of the world of Life....

In his System of Being, there is no Creature so wonderful in its Nature, and which so much deserves our particular Attention, as Man, who fills up the middle Space between the Animal and Intellectual Nature, the visible and invisible World, and is that Link in the Chain of Beings, which has been often termed the *nexus utriusque Mundi*.¹⁴

Although Addison remained a firm Christian, he did not hesitate to employ such Deistic terms as "the Supreme Being" and the "*nexus utriusque Mundi*." There were, in fact, signs of the influence of Deistic thought apparent in thinkers of this period whether they were against or for it,¹⁵ for most of them had endured the deadly conflicts of sects, which had been inflicting incurable wounds upon the European mind. They knew that Deism, in one way or another, could be regarded as what had come out of the human experience in the sectarian feuds after the Reformation as well as the human effort to establish, on the basis of reason or common sense, "quod semper, quod ubique, quod omnibus" in religion.¹⁶

This position had been precisely that of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, the first Deist in England, when he had written *De Veritate* in 1624, which had declared that true religion consists solely of things everybody knows,¹⁷ protesting against the authority of scholastic theology in the realm of intellect and asserting that what definitely conflicts with reason cannot be true: that is, he challenged revelation. Deism, in this respect, can be viewed as the first step toward the modern idea of liberal thought and free expression. In Johnson's day the most prominent propagandist of Deism was Lord Bolingbroke, from whom Alexander Pope probably borrowed some of the ideas for his *Essay on Man*. The politician held a fierce contempt for all the divines, Plato and his followers, and yet he made full use of the notion of "the Chain of Being"

in his exposition of the mechanical universe, the infinite goodness of God and man's position in the Chain. He was certain that the universe was made in order that all possible forms of being might manifest themselves after their kinds:

The whole world, nay the whole universe, is filled with beings which are all connected in one immense design. The sensitive inhabitants of our globe, like the *dramatis personae*, have different characters, and are applied to different powers of action in every scene. The several parts of the material world, like the machines of a theatre, were contrived not for the actors, but for the action: and the whole order and system of the drama would be disordered and spoiled, if any alteration was made in either. The nature of every creature, his manner of being, is adapted to his state here, to the place he is to inhabit, and, as we may say, to the part he is to act. If man was a creature inferior to what he is, he would be a very preposterous creature in this system.¹⁸

Man's lapse from the state of nature—the reign of God—is due to the sin of pride, in his attempt to leave his “middle state.”¹⁹ Now the biblical narrative of man's fall is implicitly denied and persuaded as the natural consequence of his position in the universal system, due to his imperfect intelligence. Pope sings of the ethics of the middle link:

Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
Know thy point: this kind, this due degree
Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee.
Submit.²⁰

Thus, the universe is presented as “the best possible world,” or otherwise God would not have chosen it.”²¹ To aspire after a higher sphere is pride, the sin against the law of nature. Subordination is absolutely necessary. Though the concept of the necessity of evil is similar to Spinoza's notion of “eternal necessity,”²² the idea of “the Chain of Being” has become only a vehicle for explaining the evil of

imperfection as well as the perpetuity of evil and for maintaining the static, self-sufficient view of life. Here man's hope for perfectibility is flatly negated and the traditional Christian belief is in conflict with this necessity of evil, required by infinite goodness. The theory does not lead man any further to happiness. Discontent, actual or metaphysical, is everywhere.

In 1711 *Spectator* No. 111 recorded Addison's view on the other side of "the Great Chain of Being."

Among these and other excellent Arguments for the Immortality of the Soul, there is one drawn from the perpetual Progress of the Soul to its Perfection, without a Possibility of ever arriving at it.... How can it enter into the Thoughts of Man, that the Soul, which is capable of such immense Perfections, and of receiving new Improvements to all Eternity, shall fall away into Nothing almost as soon as it is created?....

Methinks this single Consideration, of the Progress of a finite Spirit to Perfection, will be sufficient to extinguish all Envy in inferior Natures, and all Contempt in superior. That Cherubim which now appears as a God to a human Soul, knows well that the period will come about in Eternity, when the human Soul shall be as perfect as he himself now is.... It is true that higher Nature still advances, and by that means preserves his Distance and Superiority in the Scale of Being; but he knows how high soever the Station is of which he stands possessed at present, the inferior Nature will at length mount up to it, and shine forth in the same Degree of Glory.²³

In Addison's prospect of man's improving his position in the "Scale" the former static world picture is explicitly broken down. This view was further extended by Mark Akenside, a Romantic precursor, in *The Pleasures of Imagination* in 1744.

Nor content,
By one exertion of creative power
His goodness to reveal; through every age,
Through every moment up the track of time

His parent-hand with ever-new increase
Of happiness and virtue has adorned
The vast harmonious frame: his parent-hand,
From the mute shell-fish gasping on the shore,
To men, to angels, to celestial minds
Forever leads the generations on
To higher scenes of being; while supplied
From day to day with his enlivening breath,
Inferior orders in succession rise
To fill the void below.²⁴

The universe so vigorously advocated by Pope had now shown a different aspect to man. It was a world of constant change and progress. The center of emphasis had been shifted "from the human race to the human individual" that it might befit a society of laissez-faire commerce and power struggle where the old social hierarchy was gradually crumbling down because of the pressure of money and competition.

Voltaire, contemporaneous in France with Johnson, though different in temperament, proved the falsity of "the Chain of Being" in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. He defined the theory thus:

The gradation of beings from the lowest to the great Supreme—the Scale of infinity—is an idea that fills us with admiration, but when steadily regarded this phantom disappears, as apparitions were wont to vanish at the crowing of the cock.²⁵

When a man empirically observes the known facts, he can easily find the falsity of the idea. Some species have disappeared; others are disappearing. There is a visible gap between the ape and man. How can we believe the existence of immaterial beings? He concluded the definition with the exclamation, "Oh, Plato! You have done more mischief than you are aware of."²⁵

Samuel Johnson, in such an age of transition, had to cope with the problem of subordination derived from "the Chain of Being" in his *Review of A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*.

Chapter II

Experience and Speculative Philosophy

Soame Jenyns' *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* was ridiculed by Johnson as "little less than a paraphrase of Pope's Epistles."²⁷ The essay, however, has one merit, Sir Leslie Stephen acknowledges: it occasioned Johnson's celebrated review.²⁸ Without the incentive given by Jenyns he may not have so openly denounced the idea of subordination.

Jenyns presented his treatise in the form of six letters to a friend. The sum and substance of his garrulous discourse being almost the same as Bolingbroke's exposition of a world of plenitude, continuity and gradation, here a brief summary of the argument is enough. In the first letter on Evil in general he declares that he will solve the question how Evil can be the production of infinite Goodness, joined with infinite Power. He begins by denying Manichean dualism because there cannot be two first causes.²⁹ Then, although he does not reject revelation, he implicitly refutes the doctrine of the Original Sin as "a fable,"³⁰ and insists that there must always have been Evil in the world. In his zeal to prove this point, he is insensible enough to place Almighty Power in doubt over against the power of Evil, hampered by necessity in the nature of things, and to contradict his own premise on infinite power he has asserted several lines before:

The true solution of this incomprehensible paradox must be this, that all Evils owe their existence solely to the necessity of their natures, by which I mean, they could not possibly have been prevented, without the loss of some superior Good, or the permission of some greater Evil than themselves; or the many Evils will unavoidably insinuate themselves by the natural relations and circumstances of things, into the most perfect system of Created Beings, even in opposition to the will of the Almighty Creator.³¹

In the following letters on "Evils of Imperfection," "Natural Evils," "Moral Evils," "Political Evils," and "Religious Evils," he introduces,

as the typical eighteenth-century vehicle for the explanation of the necessity of evil, the concept of "the Chain of Being" in the hope that he may alleviate its disastrous consequence. This universal system of the Chain requires subordination, "all subordination implying imperfection, all imperfection Evil," and "all Evil some kind of inconvenience or suffering" because the beauty and happiness of the whole depend always on the just inferiority of its part.³² Therefore, these Evils of imperfection, proceeding from the necessary inferiority of some beings in comparison with others, can in no sense be called Evils at all.³³ Thus, through his own logic Jenyns cancels out the very existence of Evil he has intended to prove. Indeed, as Johnson describes his discourse, "all his effort ends in belief that for the Evils of life there is some reason, and in confession, that the reason cannot be found!"³⁴

Jenyns bears a strong resemblance to the persona of *A Tale of a Tub*, who by assuming the appearance of a logician confounds himself in the reality of absolute nonsense. But Jenyns is not a fictional figure and his ignorance is aggravated by an assertive confidence and pretentious complacency. "Gross ignorance every man has found equally dangerous with perverted knowledge."³⁵

It was only natural that "a man of strong nature and sad experience of life [should] reject the pretentious consolation and sham philosophy."³⁶

Johnson's attack is most vigorous on the following four points—the "Chain of Being," the necessity of Evil in terms of infinite Goodness and human happiness, the alleviations of Evils that men are doomed to suffer and finally the denial of the Fall and all possible perfection in man.

As to the doctrine of "the Chain of Being," Johnson has "always left the enquiry in doubt and uncertainty."³⁷ "Subordination in human affairs is well understood; but when it is attributed to the universal system, its meaning grows less certain, like the petty distinctions of locality, which are of good use upon our globe, but have no meaning with regard to infinite space, in which nothing is *high* or *low*."³⁸ His approach to this speculative theory is as empirical as Voltaire's. As he

rebukes Pope's ambiguous notion of man's place "somewhere" in the "scale of reasoning of life,"³⁹ he doubts how a line should be drawn between one species of imperfection and another. He continues in the same manner of logic:

It does not appear even to the imagination, that of three orders of being, the first and the third receive any advantage from the imperfection of the second, or that indeed they may not equally exist, though the second had never been, or should cease to be, and why should that be concluded necessary, which cannot be proved even to be useful?⁴⁰

He flatly dismisses the whole concept once for all by declaring that the chain of being cannot possibly have existence,⁴¹ it being raised only by proud imagination. He passes judgment that such a system, once raised, is ready to fall to pieces of itself, resting upon vacuities from step to step.⁴²

Johnson does accept the necessity of subordination in human affairs but he questions whether subordination implies imperfection, "imperfection Evil, and Evil suffering," for in his opinion imperfection may mean privation, but this privation produces no suffering, but by the help of knowledge.⁴³ He is confirmed that "there is no Evil but must inhere in a conscious being, or be referred to it: that is, Evil must be felt before it is Evil."⁴⁴ Here is a realistic view of Evil closely related to Locke's theory of good and evil. After he states that pain and pleasure come both from sensation and reflection, Locke proceeds:

Things then are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call good, which is apt to cause or increase pleasure or diminish pain in us.... And, on the contrary, we name that evil, which is apt to produce or increase pain, or diminish any pleasure in us.⁴⁵

What especially piques Johnson is Jenyns' presentation of a picture of imperfection, which is "better adapted to delight the fancy than

convinces the reason." It is blind to a larger range of the facts of existence. Jenyns' fault, indeed, lies in that he who has not known the misery of hunger attempts to persuade the reader into his metaphysical argument by means of analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, by taking for granted that there are many degrees of inferiority found within the human species.

Thus the universe resembles a large and well-regulated family, in which all the officers and servants, and even the domestic animals are subservient to each other, in a proper subordination: each enjoys the privileges and perquisites peculiar to his place, and at the same time contributes by that just subordination to the magnificence and happiness of the whole.⁴⁶

He dogmatically concludes that because of the nature of things poverty is absolutely necessary: the world could not subsist without it; "for had all been rich, none could have submitted to the commands of another, or the necessary drudgeries of life."⁴⁷ Not only poverty, but old age, sickness, pain, folly, ignorance, madness and even death are conducive to some good and happiness. Poverty is equally compensated for by having more hopes and fewer fears than riches; the sufferings of the sick are almost repaired by the transports at the return of health: folly is not grievous because imperceptible: there is pleasure in being mad. Ignorance, "appointed lot of all born to poverty, capable of infusing that insensibility necessary for enduring the miseries of life. Even death is no evil since it is "a passage to a more perfect state."⁴⁸

Johnson crushed this semi-Stoic pose by revealing the reality of poverty. Poverty is not such a gentle phenomenon but "want of necessity" which no charity can save.

Those who are born to poverty should not be deprived by an *improper education of the opiate of ignorance....* To entail irreversible poverty upon generation after generation, only because the ancestor happened to be poor, is in itself cruel, if not unjust, and is wholly contrary to the maxims of a commercial nation,

which always suppose and promote a rotation of property, and offer every individual a chance of mending his condition by his diligence.⁴⁹

This view was maintained by Johnson throughout his life, for in 1776, Boswell records, Johnson said, "While knowledge is a distinction, those who are possessed of it will naturally rise above those who are not."⁵⁰ Johnson was a man who in younger days had been forced to leave Oxford because of poverty, used to walk all night with Savage for want of a night's lodging, tasting the bitterness of human miseries to the full at Grub Street although he had risen from there to Parnassus "through his literature and his wit."⁵¹ His idea of the social hierarchy here manifested is not a static one but rather one of change and competition. His invective is actually directed not only toward Jenyns or Pope who cannot imagine there is poverty beyond human endurance but also toward the contemporary tendency to regard poverty as a crime.⁵² He sarcastically hopes that "the happiness of those whom education enables to escape from it, may turn the balance against that exacerbation which the others suffer."⁵³

Johnson was sensitive to sufferings. His fear of death is well known. *Rambler* No. 32 denounces Stoicism and says that the cure for the greater part of human miseries is "not radical but palliative."⁵⁴ Only patience relieves man from further unnecessary fear. A man of such sensibility cannot see how indifferently a philosopher asserts that one man's happiness is obtained at the expense of another.

Johnson's condemnation of *A Free Enquiry* reaches its climax at the gentleman's assumption of the existence of superior beings above man, which he has arrived at as the natural consequence of his logic in isolation from experience in life.

There may be numberless intermediate Beings, who have power to deceive, torment, or destroy us, for the ends only of their own pleasure or utility, who may be vested with the same privileges over their inferiors, and as much benefited by the use

of them, as ourselves..... In what manner these benefits accrue to them, it is impossible for us to conceive; but that impossibility lessens not the probability of the conjecture, which by analogy is so strongly confirmed.⁵⁵

This way of thinking is not unprecedented. Shakespeare had employed this analogy through his attempt to unfold a world of unmitigated evil,⁵⁶ but uttered by this optimist, the concept of the necessity of Evil has come to bear even a malicious aspect. The pain of one part benefits another and even some invisible beings may exult in their own power to play tricks upon another and draw pleasure at the sight of the miseries. Johnson must have looked, with horror, at the superfluity and danger of such a logic.

Through the technique of verisimilitude Johnson exposes how absurd and unbearable Jenyns' idea is:

How will either of those be put more in our power by him who tells us that we are puppets, of which some creature not much wiser than ourselves manages the wires. That a set of beings unseen and unheard, are hovering about us, trying experiments upon our sensibility, putting us in agonies to see our limbs quiver, torturing us to madness, that they may laugh at our vagaries, sometimes obstructing the bile, that they may see how a man looks when he is yellow; sometimes breaking a traveller's bones to try how he will get home; sometimes wasting a man to a skelton, and sometimes killing him fat for the greater elegance of his hide.⁵⁷

Jenyns' argument is quite contrary to Johnson's idea of writing: the only end of writing is to "enable the readers to enjoy life, or better to endure it." Jenyns' essay is "a plaything" for the writer, produced from a vain head proud of its own false ideas.⁵⁸ How much this account of natural Evil may contribute to patience is open to doubt.

Jenyns, however, "having exalted himself into the chair of wisdom,"⁵⁹ further expands his theory. All moral Good and Evil are nothing more than the production of nature, not from the weakness or

wickedness of particular men; although the end of virtue is to produce happiness in conformity to the will of God, the nature of all human virtue and vice is "so artificially" contrived that "their rewards and punishments are woven as it were in their own essence. For the same reason numberless imperfections are thus inherent in all human governments and religions. In the last analysis the idea of subordination proves that men are created criminals!"⁶⁰

Boswell testifies that Johnson at all times made a just distinction between doctrines contrary to reason and doctrines above reason.⁶¹ The doctrine of the necessity of Evil clearly belongs to the former. Though Johnson only could see the idea of the Original sin in the realm beyond reason, he firmly believed in the Fall of man, for *Idler* No. 89 states that "religion informs us that misery and sin were produced together and that depravation of human will was followed by a disorder of the harmony of nature."⁶² Thus, he revolts against Jenyns' negation, subsequent of his denial of the Fall, of the Christian precept that man came perfect, endued with all possible perfection, "out of the hands of his Creator."⁶³ "A state of innocence and happiness is so remote from all that we have ever seen, but," Johnson continues, "the perfection which man once had, may be so easily conceived, that without any unusual strain of imagination we can figure its revival."⁶⁴ Johnson, now, firmly shows his position on the side of the orthodox Christian tradition over against Deism.

Finally, as Jenyns' contention has fallen to pieces of itself, what Johnson has done in his *Review* is only to disclose the optimist's contradictions and blunders and make it plain that such arguments do not increase the glory of infinite Goodness and human happiness by affirming the perpetuity of Evil, but tend to blur and destroy the line between good and evil, attracting men to do Evil so that Good may come, Johnson has, in fact, nothing to offer in place of the doctrine of necessity. He too well knows that the assumed necessity is an eternal one while the concrete world lives in time and space, in constant flux and reflux. How to apply the eternal to the temporal is a question

which has never been solved. Johnson's experience has assured him of the inefficacy of speculative philosophy in giving any answer to the problem of Evil.⁶⁵ His world view is too dark and too unstable to find any way out, where every one is struggling against every one for "competition for gain, diffidence for safety, and glory for reputation."⁶⁶ Man must seek the solution in the realm beyond reason. That is a piece of practical wisdom.

Johnson's estimation of *A Free Enquiry* may be found in his confession to Boswell:

But, Sir, as to the doctrine of Necessity, no man believes it. If a man should give me arguments that I do not see, though I could not answer them, should I believe that I do not see?

Conclusion

Rasselas reduces speculative philosophy to the very root of its abstract nature and inefficacy over against reality in constant change. The Stoic philosopher breaks down before his daughter's death. The best possible world is shown incapable of even making the slightest impression upon the naïve prince. Imlac defines such a philosophy as a product of the folly of imagination:

Such, says Imlac, are the effects of visionary schemes: when we first form them we know them to be absurd, but familiarize them by degrees, and in time lose sight of this folly.⁶⁸

Idler No. 52 labels it "the fictions of imposture, or illusions of fancy," and observes "that they soon give way to time and experience; that nothing keeps its ground but truth, which gains every day new influence by new confirmation."⁶⁹

As is evident in the *Idler* paper, truth and experience are almost paralleled in Johnson. Truth is not eternal truth but a truth or, in a more practical and utilitarian sense, a fact which experience makes one feel, see and judge. Johnson's idea of "truth" must be the cause

for so much embarrassment in so many students. His love of subordination is witnessed and recorded by Boswell more often than not, but in his *Review* he rejects the static world picture based on "the Chain of Being." In place of such a universe his defense of poverty exposes a society of laissez-faire economy and power struggle, where the old hierarchy is rapidly breaking down, leaving room for the inferior to take the place of the superior through competition and knowledge. *Adventurer* No. 67 shows Johnson most settled in the endless variety and multiplicity of London.⁷⁰ This world perspective resembles Akenside's, for all Johnson's contempt for the poet.

The "inconstancies and paradoxes" in the texture of Johnson's thought are, in fact, products of his sincere pursuit of truth. What Johnson sought all through his life was truths, "disregarding all power and all authority."⁷¹ Thus, partly because he had noticed the corrupting influence of commerce and time upon the language, he wrote that "all change is of itself an evil, which ought not to be hazarded but for evident advantage."⁷² For the pleasure and beauty of a just drama he disposed the unities of time and place against the Neoclassical principles.⁷³ In the field of politics his search for the truths was more evident. *Marmor Norfolciense* (1739) was a fierce invective upon Walpole and George II. *A Complete Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage* (1739) defended the right of free expression. *Literary Magazine* No. 1 condemned colonialism as an act of usurpation and robbery. *The False Alarm* (1770), *The Patriot* (1774) and *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775) approved of the government policies suppressing the "rabble" on the basis of the truth "that there can be no limited government": when the absolute power of the government is repealed, "the whole fabrick of subordination is immediately destroyed, and the constitution sunk at once into a chaos: the society is dissolved into a tumult of individuals, without authority to command, or obligation to obey."⁷⁴

What Johnson meant by "truth" may be made clearer by another quotation from *Boswell's Life of Johnson*.

Sir, I am a friend to subordination, as most conducive to the happiness of society. There is a reciprocal pleasure in governing and being governed.⁷⁵

Here in this way of thinking Johnson's political and moral principles are *reconciled*. Happiness is not used as an abstract idea, but it is treated on the individualistic ground, full of concrete, utilitarian and moral connotations of the same kind as has been implied in his discontent with Jenyns' infinite Power: "If God could easily have excused us from labour, I do not comprehend why he could not possibly have exempted all from poverty."⁷⁶

Subordination is, indeed, instrumental in producing reciprocal pleasure and happiness for both sides, but not in giving sanction to the necessity of Evil. This political concept of subordination is only to be supported by the moral principle that "wisdom might plan, but virtue alone could execute,"⁷⁷ for the character of a society depends upon each individual member. Thus, the means of happiness to one man may not be the cause of misery to another,⁷⁸ contrary to the cruel corollary of Jenyns' idea of subordination. Then, man is happiest and perfect "in a sense consistent enough with subordination, perfect, not as compared with different beings, but with himself in his present degeneracy; not perfect, as an angel, but perfect as man."⁷⁹ Hence man's felicity is relative.⁸⁰ It is this belief in the fallen state of man—man's "present degeneracy"—that causes Johnson painfully to say that the evils inseparably annexed to the present condition of man are so numerous and afflictive that man's pursuit of happiness itself is the cause of misery.⁸¹

Surely there is no man who, thus afflicted, does not seek succour in the *gospel*, which has brought *life and immortality to light*. The precepts of *Epicurus*, who teaches us to endure what the laws of the universe make us necessary, may silence, but not content us. The dictates of *Zeno*, who commands us to look with indifference on external things, may dispose us to conceal

our sorrow, but cannot assuage it.... Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, but Religion only can give patience.⁸²

Patience, however, works only as palliative. Johnson's image of man and man's felicity is, indeed, gloomy, perhaps, worse than Swift's.⁸³ Subordination is necessary for each individual member of a society, both ruler and ruled, that he may not do Evil in the hope that Good may come. Order and stability are the sole ends to be sought in human society and for happiness: the absolute authority can best promote them. Such is the truth of life!

Johnson's approach to life is quite personal and psychological, for by examining his passions and the impatience in his own mind, he learned the violence of self-love and the unreliability of reason. By examining his own sufferings, physical and mental, he acquired the ability to "guess what passes in the minds of others" and humanitarian love of neighbors. The impossibility of solving the problem of Evil did not keep him in abject speculation. He used the negative aspects of miseries for the more active and positive purposes of life. Indeed, he "committed himself to the current of the world."⁸⁴ In the light of the truths proved by experience, he interpreted the political situation of England and works of art, and advocated for more humanitarian treatment of the poor debtors and the French prisoners of war. He even declared that "a decent provision for the poor, is the true test of civilization."⁸⁵

In the days when all fundamental values were subject to change, he fought for and held fast to what his experience had taught him to be true. His idea of subordination as the vehicle for relieving greater miseries or evils in society should be viewed in this respect. It may seem to be a mere compromise, but it bears witness that Johnson, for all his gloomy image of man, did not fall into Hume's skepticism in pursuit of facts through experience but sought humble succour in the realm above reason. It may contradict the modern notion of liberty—each individual claiming equal importance to the extent that the whole

structure of society is at the verge of breaking down. But in a more practical, experimental and moral sense it does not hamper human liberty as long as each man is wise enough to live long in harmony with the other. Such a concept of subordination, as a code of life, may be best illustrated in the character of Samuel Johnson:

He was a sincere and zealous Christian, of high Church-of-England and monarchical principles, which he would not tamely suffer to be questioned.... He was steady and inflexible in maintaining the obligations of religion and morality; both from a regard for the order of society; and from a veneration for the Great Source of all order..., impetuous and irritable in his temper, but of a most humane and benevolent heart, which shewed itself not only in a most liberal charity, as far as his circumstances would allow, but in a thousand instances of active benevolence.⁸⁶

Notes

- 1 Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (London: Nichols and Sons, 1816), III, 315. All quotations from Johnson's works will be taken from this edition and will here after cited as *Works*.
- 2 James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill and rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), III, 37.
- 3 Stuart Gerry Brown, "Dr. Johnson and the Old Order," *Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald J. Greene (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp.160-161.
- 4 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of An Idea* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p.291.
- 5 Brown, p.169.
- 6 Bertrand H. Bronson, "The Double Tradition of Dr. Johnson," *ELH*, 18(1951), p. 99.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.102.
- 8 George Sherburn and Donald F. Bond, "The Restoration and Eighteenth Century," in *A Literary History of England*, ed. Albert C. Baugh, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p.704.
- 9 Lovejoy, pp.183-184.
- 10 Plato, *Timaueus*, trans. Rev. R. G. Bury (London: William Heinemann, 1929), pp.55 and 253.
- 11 Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 414a 29-32. The concept is more empirically shown in this work than in the same author's *Metaphysics*.

- 12 Lovejoy, p.183.
- 13 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding and A Treatise on the Conduct of the Understanding* (Philadelphia: Troutman & Hayes, 1852), pp. 293-294.
- 14 Joseph Addison, *et al.*, *The Spectator*, ed. Henry Morley (London: George Routledge and Sons), p.182.
- 15 J. M. Robertson, *A Short History of Free Thought, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Russel & Russell, 1957), p.305.
- 16 Leslie Stephen, *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881), I, 83.
- 17 Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *Lord Herbert of Cherbury's De Religione Laici*, ed. & trans. Harold R. Hutcheson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), pp. 28-31.
- 18 Bolingbroke, *The Philosophical Works of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (London: 1954), N, 379.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.315.
- 20 Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, I, 281-285.
- 21 Harald Höffding, *A History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. B. E. Meyer (London: Macmillan, 1924), I, 364.
- 22 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. W. Hale White (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), p.283.
- 23 Addison, p.170.
- 24 Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination*, II, 337-350.
- 25 Francois M. A. de Voltaire, "Philosophical Dictionary," in *The Works of Voltaire* (Paris: E. R. DuMont, 1901), VII, 55.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.58.
- 27 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 25.
- 28 Stephen, I, 388.
- 29 Soame Jenyns, "A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil," in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Verse and Prose* (London: Dodsley, 1770), p.247.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p.248.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp.251-252.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p.273.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p.267.
- 34 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 60-61.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p.35.
- 36 Stephen, I, 383.
- 37 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 28.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p.39.
- 39 Johnson, *Works*, II, 189.
- 40 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 29-30.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p.30.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p.39.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p.38.

- 44 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 45 Locke, p.148.
- 46 Jenyns, p.267.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p.274.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp.263-277.
- 49 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 35.
- 50 Boswell, III, 37.
- 51 *Ibid.*, I, 74.
- 52 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 85.
- 53 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 36.
- 54 Johnson, *Works*, IV, 208.
- 55 Jenyns, pp.283-284.
- 56 Cf. As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
 They kill us for their sport.
 William Shakespeare, *King Lear* IV. i. 36-37.
- 57 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 48.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 59 Johnson, *Works*, II, 190.
- 60 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 58.
- 61 Boswell, IV, 329.
- 62 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 357.
- 63 Jenyns, p.303.
- 64 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 58.
- 65 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 357.
- 66 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. D. Lindsay (London: Dent, 1957), p.64.
- 67 Boswell, IV, 329.
- 68 Johnson, *Works*, III, 425.
- 69 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 207.
- 70 Johnson, *Works*, III, 165.
- 71 Boswell, I, 74.
- 72 Johnson, *Works*, II, 11.
- 73 Johnson, *Works*, II, 95. 103.
- 74 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 168.
- 75 Boswell, I, 408.
- 76 Johnson, *Works*, VIII, 41.
- 77 Boswell, II, 118.
- 78 Johnson, *Works*, III, 247.
- 79 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 57.
- 80 Johnson, *Works*, III, 247.
- 81 Johnson, *Works*, III, 402.
- 82 Johnson, *Works*, VII, 166.
- 83 Boswell, V, 211.
- 84 Johnson, *Works*, III, 400.
- 85 Boswell, II, 130.
- 86 *Ibid.*, IV, 426.

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